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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000149

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SUBJECT: SYRIA - SAUDI ARABIA: MOVING TOWARD NORMALIZATION?

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Algerian ambassador provided his understanding February 25 of the sequencing of a normalization in ties between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Initiated by joint concern over Saudi jihadists on the loose, renewed contacts between the two have been expanded from the counter-terrorism domain to a larger political context on the insistence of the Syrians. The Saudis were reportedly amenable in part in order to stem Syria's facilitation of Turkish and Iranian "interference" in intra-Arab affairs. Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal may come to Damascus as part of an Arab League Troika to prepare for the late March summit in Doha. Movement in the relationship with Saudi Arabia is reportedly partly responsible for the SARG's reversal of its decision not to attend the March 2 Arab League meeting on Gaza reconstruction in Sharm el-Sheikh. The new relationship between Syria and Saudi Arabia, while still nascent, will be tested by the pre-elections period in Lebanon, where the two are seen to have conflicting interests. End Summary.

Joint Concerns re Counter-Terrorism

12. (C) Algerian Ambassador Salah Boucha told Charge February 25 that SARG FM Walid al-Muallim's visit to Riyadh the previous day had been part of a joint effort to relieve tensions in the bilateral relations. According to Boucha (protect), after the September 28 2008 bombing in Damascus, the SARG sent the Saudis a "very precise" list of Saudi jihadists on the loose that created great concern in Riyadh. Contacts between the two governments ensued, with SARG General Intelligence Directorate (GID) chief Ali Mamluk visiting Riyadh. Saudi Interior Minister Prince Muqrin's February 16 visit to Damascus followed up on those initial contacts.

13. (C) The Algerian Ambassador said that the Saudis had wanted to restrict renewed contacts with the Syrians to the counter-terrorism sphere. The SARG, however, had rejected that restriction and insisted that the counter-terrorism cooperation could only proceed in the context of improved political relations. To facilitate the resumption of a political bilateral relationship, Arab League (AL) SYG Amre Moussa visited Damascus February 17 and got Syrian agreement to send Muallim to Riyadh February 24.

AL Troika in Damascus March 15?

14. (C) The next step, according to Boucha, is for the Saudis to send FM Saud al-Faisal to Damascus, a step that the Saudis are not particularly keen to take. The Syrians want him to visit in a bilateral context but, according to Boucha, it seems more likely that he would come as part of the AL Troika, on or about March 15, in order to prepare for the AL Summit in Doha later in the month. (Note: The Troika currently comprises Syria as current AL president, Qatar as the next president, and Saudi Arabia as the preceding president. End Note) The Syrians ultimately aim for a visit to Damascus by Saudi King Abdullah but recognize the time is not yet ripe for that step. Asad reportedly believes he should not take the first step by going to Riyadh (he was invited during the January Arab Economic Forum in Kuwait) because he last visited Saudi Arabia in 2007, a visit that has not yet been reciprocated by Abdullah.

Muallim to Sharm el-Sheikh

15. (C) Another positive sign in intra-Arab reconciliation, the Ambassador said, was the Syrian reversal in position on participating in the March 2 AL meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh on Gaza reconstruction. The Syrians had refused to attend, based on their unhappiness with the projected role for Hamas and Egypt's continued "monopolization" of the Palestinian reconciliation process. Amre Moussa's visit and the trend toward rapprochement with the Saudis had made the SARG decide

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to send Muallim to the meeting after all. (Note: Muallim confirmed his plan to attend during a February 21 meeting with Codel Kerry. End Note)

16. (C) Asked if the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement was not leaving Egypt out in the cold, Boucha said that the Saudis have their "own calculations." They were unnerved by recent Shia rioting in Medina and unrest in Bahrain and found themselves "under great pressure" during the Gaza conflict. Moreover, the Saudis are unhappy with the cleavage in the AL that is providing opportunities for Turkey and Iran to interfere in Arab affairs; they want to bring Syria (which so far has actively facilitated Turkish and Iranian participation) back into the fold. Egypt, he noted, "had lost something" during the Gaza conflict, with the criticism over the closed borders in particular causing Egypt to lose prestige among the Arabs. As a partner, Egypt's value, he implied, had been diminished, at least in the eyes of the Saudis.

17. (C) Comment: Syria and Saudi Arabia are clearly on a track towards some degree of normalization, a process that will be tested, however, by the pre-election period in Lebanon where Syria's and Saudi Arabia's interests are generally seen to be in opposition. There has been no indication publicly, nor privately in the recent series of Codel meetings with Asad, that Syria is toning down its criticism of what it sees as dangerous Saudi meddling in Lebanon on behalf of Saad Hariri. As much as the Saudis may be concerned by the list of jihadists, the Syrians were also rattled by the September bombing, enough it seems to reassess the cold war with the Saudis. It is interesting to note, however, that the SARG reportedly refused to engage in a relationship) no matter how potentially useful) purely founded on mutual counter-terrorism concerns without a political relationship as an umbrella.
CONNELLY